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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the increasingly corporatist mentality within higher education, focusing on the role of the government within Canada, and elsewhere, to reshape higher education into narrow occupational training. It notes that while governments in Canada and the United States have reduced public funding for higher education, they have pursued agendas of increasing accountability through quantifiable outcomes and the forced narrowing of education to production of the workforce. The paper cites numerous critics of the corporatist-conservative agenda who discuss the growing role of government and business in shaping and spreading this agenda. It examines recent efforts by local and provincial governments in Canada to reshape higher education ministries to focus on worker training, to the neglect or outright abandonment of the humanist emphasis of higher education. The paper concludes that the potentials of these trends and corporatist controls include the loss, for future generations, of the critical sensibilities necessary to evaluate and reorder the state/corporate agenda. (Contains 19 references.) (MDM)

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SERVICE OF THE ECONOMY: Education Ministry Reconfigurations and the Corporatist Agenda

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Abstract

While conservative and neoliberal governments have assumed power worldwide on platforms of reducing the roles of government in public life, and while they have in fact reduced public funding of higher education, they have nonetheless pursued agendas in higher education of increased accountability through quantifiable outcomes, the assumption of authorities previously reserved to institutions and faculties, and the forced narrowing of education to production of the workforce. Several commentators, writing from several national perspectives, bring theoretical and analytical perspective to this seeming contradiction, and link the interests of governments in reshaping education to corporatist imperatives.

Evidences of these trends are apparent to many in Canada, particularly from local and provincial perspectives. But an analysis of the reconfiguration of higher education ministries and departments across the nation reveals a consistent movement toward vocationalization of government priorities in higher education. The potentials of these trends and corporatist controls include the loss, for future generations, of the critical sensibilities necessary to evaluate and reorder the state/corporate agenda.

Higher Education in the Service of the Economy: Education Ministry Reconfigurations and the Corporatist Agenda

John Ralston Saul, in *The Unconscious Civilization* (1995), holds (p. 34) that "we live in a corporatist society with soft pretensions to democracy. More power is slipping every day over towards the groups," these groups being corporate or other business entities, government ministries, professional associations, and so on. This grouping is seen, somewhat paradoxically, as a breaking apart of more holistic social concerns and entities.

Higher education, in Saul's bill of particulars, does not escape conspiratorial indictment. It has betrayed its wider mission, deserting the teaching of the humanist tradition in favor of narrow specializations, retreating into "the worst of medieval scholasticism" (p. 70). The bulk of this specialization has shifted to the "teaching of transient managerial and technological skills" (p. 15). The result is a further spiraling of unconsciousness, in the service of the corporatist state, producing the crude graduate "who is limited to a narrow area of knowledge and practice and has the naivete of a child in most other areas" (p. 15).

Certainly there are those within the academy who benefit from and cooperate with the ascendancy of unconscious corporatism. And the concern within the academy and sectors of society about this erosion of humanist education to the strengthening of technical, mechanical skills is not particularly novel. The 1951 Massey-Lévesque Commission, for example, decried the "neglect and distortion of the humanities" in Canada's universities (Emberly 1996, p. 146).

But as willing as many within academe may be to be pulled into corporatism, a force of equal potency has been the push received from governments both federal and provincial. And although the tensions of humanistic education vis a vis technical education have always existed, particularly in a nation presenting the geographic and physical challenges to settlement that has the land of Canada, governments of late years have become more aggressive in their assault on the traditions of the liberal arts, more firmly allied with immediate big business interests. One evidence of this trend and aggressiveness is made apparent by the restructuring of governmental ministries responsible for education, restructuring which has made plain the subservient role to which conventional higher education has been assigned below the preparation of the trained for specific workforce roles. This restructuring has been more radical and accelerated under recent provincial Tory governments, but it has been endorsed in various locations and by governments of various stripes. Some detailing of these ministerial reconfigurations, in five different provinces as well as at the federal level, will follow a discussion of the underlying philosophy driving this movement.

Of course, the conservative/corporate consolidation of power over higher education is not a phenomenon restricted to Canada. Even casual observers of higher education note that governments in Australia, New Zealand, England, and the United States have reduced funding to higher education simultaneously with their exercise of greater power over the academies, in matters of tenure, curricula,

governance, and quantitative outcomes. In what has become a tired joke in the United States, an administrator at a public university can always begin a speech by noting that his or her institution used to be described as state supported, was later described as state assisted, and is now described as state regulated.

Behind the nervous laughter is hard truth. From fiscal year 1987 to fiscal year 1996, the portion of U.S. state general fund expenditures devoted to higher education declined from 15.5% to 12.9%. The decline is more stark when one considers, simultaneously, the inflationary evaporation of dollar effectiveness and increased numbers of students. Using those factors of comparison, U.S. state effective payment efforts per student have declined 26% between fiscal years 1987 and 1996. Forty-seven of the fifty states have contributed to the decline, with state payment efforts declining 40-50% in the states of Florida, Kentucky, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Virginia (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1997). Meanwhile, a comparable number of states have increased their oversight and mandates in matters of faculty workloads, performance measurements, and core curricula, matters once reserved in large to institutional governance (Chronicle of Higher Education, August 29, 1997). States are, virtually universally, expecting ever increasing powers in running public higher education in return for an ever decreasing fiscal investment.

While parsimonious attitudes toward education may seem compatible with the worldwide conservative agenda and trend, the consolidation of real power to central governments would appear contradictory to pledges to reduce the size and scope of government. Many authors have commented upon these conditions, and upon the corporate priorities that governments are bringing to this ascendant authoritarianism, within the education contexts of the Western and English-speaking world. Notation of some of these perspectives is helpful to our consideration of such trends as they have been evidenced in Canada.

Stuart Hall (1980), a British sociologist, wrote at the dawn of the Thatcher era about the concept of "authoritarian populism," a "creeping authoritarianism masked by the rituals of formal representation," leading to a "gradual suspension of many of the traditional bases of democratic representation" (p. 160-1). Although Hall attributed this trend most directly to conservatives, he found it a general condition of contemporary political discourse. Jim Marino (1995) has discussed Ralph Klein's apparent affinity for such a construct, noting that the premier lauds "consultation," particularly in the reshaping of higher education, while loading forums and panels with those preselected for support of his agenda and excluding those with differing views.

Michael W. Apple, an American critic of education policy, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, but increasingly in postsecondary contexts, introduces several helpful concepts phrasings. He writes (1995) particularly of industries and their desires to expand markets, products, and consumption. To do this, industries must guarantee the accumulation of both economic and cultural capital. "These needs required much larger influence in the place where both agents and knowledge were produced--the university" (p. 101). Apple cites Englishman Andy Green in the enunciation of four trends that have characterized the conservative movements in both

Britain and the U.S.--privatization, centralization, vocationalization, and differentiation. But Apple does not spare neoliberals, who emphasize, he says, marketization and privatization in education. In the guise of enhancing peoples' rights in education through democratic participation, the neoliberal emphases in fact seeks to contain politics, to "reduce all politics to economics, to an ethic of 'choice' and 'consumption'" (p. 95). The result is what Apple calls the "commodification" of education, and the reduction of the university to a supermarket.

Sheila Slaughter, another American, notes that the higher education literature of that nation is notably clean of philosophical or theoretical perspectives, and is largely functionalist, not having adapted from the expansionist era of the '60s and '70s when resources were abundant and the research questions centered around efficiency in delivery. Slaughter is not guilty of this limitation in perspective. Her book-length study (1990) of the relationship of private enterprise and higher education, as reflected through documentation and interpretation of the prestigious, national Business-Higher Education Forum, leads her to this conclusion about the business-higher education relationship (pp. 186-7):

> Although the relationship is presented as reciprocal, corporations actually dominate....Universities are expected to create human capital,...to engage in research that meets entrepreneurial needs, and to share faculty expertise with multinationals. In return, universities can expect careers for their graduates, a stake in the hoped-for prosperity that business-higher education partnerships will create, and honorary membership in the private sector....Perhaps more importantly, the shared values of corporations and campuses promise a political alliance in which the two sectors will work together to increase public subsidy to the private sector, very broadly construed.

Universities have done there part, Slaughter says, transforming graduate schools into "broad-gauged M.B.A. programs" (p. 189) and similarly tailoring much of their raison d'etre to the corporatist agenda. Slaughter also suggests that universities have been a bargain purchase for corporations; at her writing, they provided only 1.3% of all the nation's university budgets.

Finally, we note a perspective from Australia, from Victor Soucek, writing (1995a,b) on the privatization and commercialization of education in that country, from the perspective of post-Fordist analysis. The Fordist/post-Fordist framework suggests that the world economy has shifted from one emphasizing mass production and mass consumption, in which governments saw their role as creating the requisite conditions for capitalism but actively protecting wages, to one emphasizing world-wide economic competition against low-wage regions, in which capital formation and the development of high-level specializations are key, and in which government's primary economic role is the active protection of capital and profit. Under such conditions, government's educational standards turn exclusively to economic quantification, at the expense of the unquantifiable. "Democratic aspirations, self-fulfilment, happiness, social justice, and equity of life opportunities" are now "dysfunctional to the emerging regime" of

"corporate federalism" (pp. 132, 135). Intellectualism may have some role in the rarefied and increasingly exclusive realm of critically based liberal arts education, but for the vast majority of people, the Australian government's opinion seems to be, according to Soucek, the development of creativity, moral and psychological development, and social consciousness is not only expensively irrelevant, but even counterproductive. The implications of the banishment of critics from social policy formation and the banishment of critical analysis from curricula could mean that "future generations will have little capacity to resist being swamped by their own economized actuality" (p. 251).

We now move to the main point of this paper, that higher education in Canada is more driven than in the past by corporate concerns and priorities, and that an evidence of this is the fundamental restructuring of higher education ministries across the nation to reflect and enforce these concerns and priorities.

Earlier this year, Garland Publishing, as part of its series on higher education topics, published Higher Education in Canada: Different Systems, Different Perspectives. It is edited by Glen A. Jones of the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education. Each chapter, each by a different author or set of them, features in turn the higher education systems of the various provinces and territories. The perspectives are almost all narratives of he history of higher education in the jurisdiction under consideration, taking the reader to the brink of future with light speculation on coming developments. As Canadian higher education is almost an entirely public enterprise, as opposed to the public-private mix extent in the U.S., a histories of provincial higher education are fairly considered to be concurrently the histories of government policies and roles in that education.

The book is substantial and marks a new starting point for any individual seeking to gain an overall understanding of the history and circumstances of Canadian higher education. But there are limitations to the province/chapter approach and the divvying of it all provincial borders among several authors. There is a focus upon governmental process and policy in each province as if unique to that province. There is a downplaying of broad political contexts and issues, the emergence of which seem to escape detection because of the short provincial horizon. For example and in particular, several authors note that within their own province, ministries once devoted solely to higher education have in recent years been subsumed under ministries of labor, economic development, or the like. The Gestalt of this as a national trend escapes explicit detection or note. These ministry reconfigurations and the resultant policy directives on curricula and missions fail to raise concerns that liberal education itself is being demoted under short-term corporate and vocational interests.

David Cameron, in his introductory chapter on the Canadian federal government's role in higher education, concentrates upon its hot-and-cold interest in higher education, or what he calls its "chronic schizophrenia" (p. 9), particularly as regards financial support. He notes but does comment at any length upon the government's 1989 effort to seek the provinces cooperation in a "national task force on human resources development" (p. 24), an issue in which all the provinces but Quebec cooperated by referring the matter to the provincially-based Council of

Ministries of Education, Canada. Cameron writes that the Meech Lake debacle put an end to most federal-provincial cooperations such as the one proposed for human resources development through education. But the Liberals seemed to carry on with the Progressive Conservatives agenda on such matters, or at least concurred with their framing of higher education issues in workforce terms. In 1993, Lloyd Axworthy was put in charge of the newly created Department of Human Resources Development, formed in large part from a merger of the Employment and Immigration Commission with the education branch of the Secretary of State's department. The new department was charged with, in Cameron's words, "reconstructing the entire array of federal social security programs--including labour market training and postsecondary education" (p. 24). Despite continued "schizophrenic" initiatives and then retreats in its fiscal support of higher education since then, the federal government has created a mechanism through which the priorities and purposes of higher education and vocational/economic development are perceived to be interchangeable and inseparable.

British Columbia has pioneered the latter-day proliferation of "university colleges," those institutions previously restricted to relatively short-term, vocational programs but which are gaining increased autonomy and degree-granting authority. Simultaneously, the province has created both British Columbia Institute of Technology and Royal Roads University. The latter is an institution which, essentially, creates degree and other programs on demand, primarily in response to employment and employer demand, and which operates without a standing, tenured faculty. One may choose to view these developments, the creation of these new institutions, as creative attempts to address problems of a changing economy and broadly dispersed populations. One may also wish to consider that these new institutional types depend upon an enhancement of the role of vocationalism, a demotion of means and ends of liberal education as a foundation of education resulting in a university degree, and systemic, multi-fronted attack on the concept of faculty direction of curricula and purposes.

The New Democratic Party government of British Columbia in the early '90s initiated the British Columbia Human Resource Development project. The project's final report in 1992 called for more cooperative programs among business, higher education, and the government. At about the same time, the NDP government appointed a new minister, for Skills, Training, and Labour; all postsecondary education was put in the portfolio. Even in a province in which higher education as a whole has done well financially relative to the rest of Canada, author John Dennison noted that "funding will not flow as it has in the past. It appears that postsecondary education in British Columbia must inevitably become more responsive to government priorities if it is to maintain viability in a competitive market" (p. 49). The government is increasingly interested in exercising the prerogative of their interests. As Dennison wrote, "government has gradually become a more powerful senior partner."

You here in Alberta and at the Parkland Institute surely know, in great and personal detail, about the changing nature of the provincial government's interests in, or perhaps abandonment of, postsecondary education. While we in the U.S. are

harangued with the hollow admonition that we should "do more with less," the government of Alberta clearly intends that higher education here do less with less. What is to be eliminated are those programs and priorities that do not coincide with the government's corporatist, vocational agenda. While the postsecondary sector as a whole suffered a 20% cut in government funds over three years, only those programs with blunt and exclusive vocational purposes received even parsimonious additional funding.

We will concentrate, with regard to Alberta, only upon the historic configurations and mutations of those provincial departments or commissions with university oversight responsibilities. From 1966 to 1973, this was the Alberta Universities Commission, with overlapping creation of the Department of Advanced Education in 1971, to 1976. Subsequently to that, we saw the development of the Department of Advanced Education and Manpower. Now, and since 1992, we witness the oversight of the Department of Advanced Education and Career Development, under Jack Ady. This department was created with more explicit responsibility for manpower concerns

Andrews, Holdaway, and Mowat date the efforts of the government to assert a more authoritarian role in university governance and direction to the election of the Progressive Conservatives in 1971. But certainly, the 1992 appointment of Ady and the policy initiatives since then have represented an escalation of this authoritarianism. Jim Marino in his essay "Clearcutting the Groves of Academe" (1995) documented some of the early strategies and casualties of this Klein offensive. Andrews, Holdaway, and Mowat, writing from a more descriptive and less ideologically analytic perspective in Higher Education in Canada nonetheless offer substantial criticism of the Klein priorities: "Even university degree programs are seen in the light of economic development and not as nurturers of original human thought. This would seem to neglect the perspective that we live in a rapidly changing world which requires people who can adapt, be resourceful, and advance in the face of the unexpected" (p. 89).

In Saskatchewan, when the Tories came to power in 1982, they established in short order the Department of Advanced Education and Manpower, replacing a department solely devoted to education, and announced that labour needs of the province would be the department's primary focus. All education in the province, and the library system, were placed under the department in 1987. The NDP came to power in 1992, but has done little to modify the priorities in postsecondary education established by the Tories (Muir, 1997).

In Manitoba, the University Education Review Commission, popularly known at the Roblin Commission, undertook in the early '90s a comprehensive look at higher education in the province. Unlike a predecessor commission of 20 years earlier, the Roblin Commission contained no academic representation. It's 1992 report advocated more accountability, more "practical" research, and the need to "re-assert management responsibilities." Most intriguingly, the commission called for a doubling of enrollment within five years--while acknowledging that financial resources were unlikely to increase significantly in this same period. While the government has yet to act substantively on most of the commission's recommendations, it has appointed a

second deputy minister within the Department of Education and Training; the minister's responsibility is for the integration of advanced education and skills training. Beyond this, the government has pledged to implement benchmarks and priorities for universities taking into account the Roblin Commission recommendations, particularly its economic priorities (Gregor, 1997).

The Harris government has been blamed for the most regressive policies and configurations of the Ontario provincial government vis a vis universities, and deservedly so, but the prior Rae government was that which eliminated the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. That ministry was combined with several others to form the Ministry of Education and Training. The Tory government which came to power in 1995 has let this linkage stand, and has simultaneously cut expenditures for higher education while demanding a stronger role for the government in university affairs. As Jones notes (p. 157), "there is a certain irony in the fact that government interest in accountability seems to have grown as the government's contributions to higher education decline."

And that is the circumstance in all of the provinces discussed here. Tory governments have been more explicit and aggressive in this pattern, but NDP and Liberal governments as well have subsumed higher education under economic and labour-force directives and corporate priorities, have sought to enforce these priorities through more direct oversight of higher education governance, and have seized this expanded authority despite reduced financial investments in higher education, in particular the university sector.

Much of this has been accomplished in the name of "global competitive preparedness," a corporate mantra and contemporary rationalization for virtually any policy which places corporate and capital interests above those of labour and broader society. A more useful and revealing capitalist term for the developments spoken of in this paper might be one from the early 1980s: the leveraged buyout. Corporations have purchased political processes and politicians themselves. They have reduced their taxes and their obligations to the societies in which they thrive. They have forced, sometimes subtly, sometimes aggressively, those cash-strapped functions of government which survive the budgetary diets to conform to their priorities. In the best tradition of the leveraged buyout, they have accomplished this and gained returns for mere pennies on the dollar, by careful application of their pressures at the weak points.

We in higher education have been such a weak point. We have vast resources and potential for exploitation. We have made inadequate defense of these resources. Those among our alumni, in our communities, in our governments, whom we might expect to help defend more broadly defined and ambitious higher education have largely failed to do so. This failure extends event to those who claim leadership of our universities.

The authors of this paper contend that this is our circumstance because John Ralston Saul is right. We in higher education, as a broad sector, have failed to adequately distinguish, even conceptually, let along publicly, the interests of corporatism from those of society as a whole. We have been guilty of merely

functionalist analyses of our society and of higher education in particular. We are, indeed, unconscious.

Peter Emberly, in *Zero Tolerance* (1996), writes that while the university is made poorer and corporate power over it is enriched:

> The idea of public goods and community--trumped. The idea of education as a social benefit--trumped. The idea of the university as detached but nonetheless powerfully capable of informing social policy--trumped. The idea that the deeper satisfactions individuals seek need to be sustained by public validation--trumped. (p. 198)

And that is why the work of the Parkland Institute and efforts like it will be increasingly important if the higher education system from which we benefited as students and professionals is to exist in any recognizable form a generation or two hence.

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